A New Islander Profile

by G. E. Mortimore

THE FLYING PIONEER

FREDERICK Maurice McGregor, the Victoria-born president of B.C. Air Lines, began flying at 17 and became a commercial pilot at 18.

During his 31-year career, from pilot's seat to executive desk, Canadian aviation has grown up.

He helped open Trans-Canada Airlines' first office in a room that was bare of furniture, with the telephone sitting on the floor. He was at the controls for TCA's first flight.

In his bush pilot days he and his fellow-pilots flew over unmapped country, sketching their own maps, and competed fiercely for passengers.

From the first he had planned to move into the executive branch of commercial aviation, when his active flying career drew to a close. So he became a builder and manager of airlines.

He helped to stretch TCA and Canadian Pacific Airlines routes around the world. Pakistan hired him to build an international airline from the ground up.

Now, at 48, he is the head man of an aggressive airline that links the cities and the frontiers of a developing province.

B.C. Air Lines, which he and his Netherlands-born partner, Paul Tak, bought in 1956 from its founder, Bill Sylvester of Victoria, operates 25 aircraft up and down the B.C. coast and inland.

Under Mr. Sylvester and under Mr. McGregor, B.C. Air Lines earned itself the reputation of being a resourceful firm that specialized in doing the impossible.

Now B.C. Air Lines is making a bid to replace Mr. McGregor's old firm, TCA, on the Victoria-Vancouver-Seattle run.

He says that if TCA wants to move out or the government decides they should, B.C. Air Lines, just as much as other contenders for the route, is well qualified to move in.

"Some people may feel that we're chiefly a coastal, non-scheduled and charter company," he says. "But from my years of experience with TCA and CPA, I know full well what is required to produce a high standard of safety and efficiency in the public interest.

"We wouldn't attempt to do anything except on that basis. I have looked into the question of providing large, modern aircraft and found it to be entirely feasible.

"I set up an airline from scratch in Pakistan, operating Super Constellations, Convairs and DC3s. So I'm quite familiar with the standards of and techniques required for a major air line."

Whatever way the contest for the Victoria-Vancouver-Seattle route is decided, Maurice McGregor will always be recognized as one of the builders of Canadian aviation.

SOLOED AT 17

He is a round-faced man with a small moustache and thinning hair. His relaxed, amiable manner conceals a shrewd, organizing brain. He inherits a liking for hard work from his father, veteran insurance agent Fred McGregor of Victoria.

He is the oldest of four. Brother Bruce recently retired from the Royal Canadian Navy; Ray is a TCA pilot, flying as captain of Super-Constellations. Mrs. Doreen Sweeting, a sister, lives in Victoria.

Hal Wilson taught Maurice McGregor to fly with B.C. Airways on Victoria's Lansdowne Field, now covered with houses. This company was formed by the Eve brothers. They operated western Canada's first scheduled air transport company in 1928 with Ford tri-motors, Victoria-Vancouver-Seattle. Maurice McGregor soloed at 17, got his commercial licence at 18.

B.C. Airways was a short-lived venture. After it folded, Maurice McGregor went barnstorming, ran a flying school, flew on fisheries patrol.

"People looked on flying with skepticism, except for just a few enthusiasts, and in the 1930's, people just didn't have the money. And airplanes were unreliable. Their engines were always failing.

"I remember when a prominent gentleman came to me, a first-war flyer who wanted a refresher course. That was Jimmy Gray. I remember I told him how much safer airplanes had become since he last flew. On the first take-off from Lansdowne field, the engine stopped over the houses. I managed to land on a couple of vacant lots, put the plane down in front of a house. I folded the wings of the Moth and put it on the streetcar tracks to take it away.

"And the man who was taking the refresher course said: 'Airplanes haven't changed'."

One of the jobs on fisheries patrol was to fly in search of a missing pilchard run. A dark tinge in the water betrayed the presence of the elusive

MAURICE McGREGOR
. . . knows the Frontiers.

fish. There was no radio in those days, so Maurice McGregor made a run over the fishing boats and dropped a message in a bottle, telling the fishermen what course to steer for a school of pilchard.

He joined Canadian Airways and flew miners, prospectors, trappers, missionaries and policemen into remote wilderness places, landing on tiny lakes to pick up ill and injured men.

At several B.C. and northern Ontario points, Maurice McGregor was stationed as pilot in charge. That meant he was passenger agent, baggage man, pilot and the rest of the staff all rolled into one.

He and Grant McConachie (now president of Canadian Pacific Air Lines) were pilots for rival companies at Burns Lake, B.C. They competed strenuously for the meagre traffic.

Once, at Kenora, Ont., Maurice McGregor and a competing pilot literally had a tug-o-war for a passenger. He was Maurice McGregor's passenger, but the other pilot coolly tried to escort the man away to his own aircraft.

McGregor argued the point. As the two flyers exchanged words, each grabbed one of the passenger's arms. They pulled in opposite directions. Maurice McGregor won. He ushered his passenger, luckily undamaged, into his plane.

AERIAL DOG FIGHT

Once, when he was transporting two trappers, their gear, food and 14 husky dogs in a Fokker monoplane, a fight broke out among the dogs, who had shaken off their muzzles. The passengers were separated from the pilot by a partition, but Mr. McGregor was startled by the noise behind his head. He got the plane down at its destination, and opened the cabin door on a scene of blood and confusion.

In 1935, before Trans-Canada Airlines was thought of, Don MacLaren of Canadian Airways launched the idea of a transcontinental air service. MacLaren, Maurice McGregor, Billy Wells and Herbert Hollick-Kenyon were the first pilots trained in up-to-date airline techniques, to fly the two Lockheed Electras and a Stearman that the company acquired.

On Sept. 1, 1937, when Maurice McGregor and Billy Wells as co-pilots had completed the Seattle-Vancouver run, they were informed that the newly-formed TCA had bought out the operation. Five staff men, including the pilots and Wallace Courtney (now TCA manager in Victoria) were sold along with the planes, like ball players being sold to another club.

During the turn around, the name of Canadian Airways was painted off the aircraft, and the name of TCA was painted on. For some reason, the furniture of the tiny office did not go with the deal, and moving men had been instructed to take it all out.

So Maurice McGregor and his colleagues found themselves lealing with passengers in an empty room, writing out passenger manifests on the wall, merely crossing the Canadian Airways name off the forms and writing TCA on.

Then Captain McGregor and Captain Wells, with 10 passengers, took off for Seattle. It was TCA's first flight.

Maurice McGregor flew the first night air mail over the Rockies. In 1940, TCA named him assistant superintendent of flight operations. He was responsible for the training and standards of flight personnel, flight despatch, station managers and ground stations—all matters of administration and operation—from Vancouver to Winnipeg.

During the years of war expansion, he flew, worked on the ground and trained pilots at frantic speed. In one month, at Lethbridge, he logged more than 250 hours training and checking out new captains and first officers.

A series of combined flying and administrative posts followed: Operations superintendent, eastern division, TCA; operations manager, Canadian Government Trans-Atlantic Ltd. (which became Trans-Canada Atlantic Ltd.).

He was made responsible for building and running an overseas air service from Montreal to Prestwick, later to London, for commercial passengers, mail and express.

He became a sort of diplomat of aviation, negotiating with many countries for new services overseas: through Shannon, Eire; Iceland; from Montreal and Toronto to Nassau, Kingston, Jamaica, Trinidad, Tampa and St. Petersburg, Fla.

As operations manager, he was made responsible for the development of service overseas; keeping up efficiency to compete with British, American and European airlines; running the entire operation and making high-level diplomatic arrangements in each country.

In Barbados, where the airport was unsuitable for four-engined aircraft, he induced the colonial governor to secure funds from Britain's Colonial Development Corp. to expand the field. Canada, through Air Vice-Marshall Thomas Cowley, director-general of air services, lent Barbados an airport construction engineer.

TOUGH ASSIGNMENT

In 1952 Maurice McGregor moved to Canadian Pacific Airlines as director of development. His job was to negotiate agreements with foreign countries to establish a CPA service to the Orient and South America. The Canadian government had been unable to reach an agreement with Mexico, Peru and Brazil. CPA was authorized to seek private agreements.

Maurice McGregor managed to reach agreement with Mexico and Peru (not Brazil); later with Argentina. In one Latin American country he talked for a month with non-English-speaking officials through a deaf interpreter who, for diplomatic reasons, could not be replaced.

He completed an economic analysis of traffic potential and operating costs of the South American service.

In addition to his duties as director of development, he was named manager of overseas lines. Canadian Pacific overseas routes then were to Hong Kong, Tokyo, Mexico, Peru, Honolulu, Fiji, New Zealand and Australia. McGregor completed all arrangements and organized from scratch CPA's service to Mexico and Peru.

Then he took leave of absence from CPA to tackle the massive job of organizing a new international airline for Pakistan. He had to merge Orient Airways, a rather weak private airline, with the beginning of a new government airline. The country's safety standards and operating techniques were poor, and trained people scarce. Maurice McGregor brought in technicians in engineering, maintenance, traffic control and other skills; hired Dutch pilots to train his air crews, set up standards, planned schedules and got the airline running.

The airline joined the principal Pakistan cities, spanned 1,000 miles of India, and connected Karachi to London via Cairo in a one-stop, 17-hour service—the fastest of any airline.

Now he is in the air transport business for himself. After 31 years of experience on four continents, Maurice McGregor, "international bush pilot," knows his business as well as any man in Canada.